



## The Administration's Bad Case for a Bad War in Syria

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President Barack Obama seemed headed for war with Syria before the public rose in opposition and Russia's Vladimir Putin offered the president a way out. Yet the threat of another unnecessary Middle Eastern war is not over. The administration continues to threaten to use force to enforce the agreement to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons.

Congress and the public need to maintain pressure on President Obama against military action. Syria's chemical weapons weren't worth war before the deal. They aren't worth war after the deal.

After two and a half years of war in Syria the president has suddenly perceived global disaster: "If we won't enforce accountability in the face of this heinous act, what does it say about our resolve to stand up to others who flout fundamental international rules? To governments who would choose to build nuclear arms? To terrorists who would spread biological weapons? To armies who carry out genocide?"

It would say nothing.

The U.S. has achieved one important objective since 9/11: it has killed and incapacitated terrorists who threaten America. Yet blowing up Syria would empower the most radical rebel factions.

In contrast, the U.S. never considered military action against Pakistan over nuclear weapons, while a strike on Syria likely would convince Iran to move forward on a weapon, since only a nuclear arsenal could offer genuine security from American military action.

Only rarely has the U.S. stopped foreign slaughter. Mass murder in Stalin's Soviet Union and Mao's China sparked no military intervention.

Equally unpersuasive was the president's contention: "The international community's credibility is on the line. And America's and Congress' credibility is on the line because we give lip service to the notion that these international norms are important."

There is no such thing as "the international community," let alone "the international community's credibility." And it's a bit late for the president to worry about giving only lip service to international norms.

The U.S. actually supported Saddam Hussein, who used chemical weapons, against Iran. The U.S. failed to forcibly confront nuclear proliferation in Israel, North Korea, India, and Pakistan. The U.S. doesn't like genocide, but ignores it in Africa and Asia.

Secretary of State John Kerry said that the U.S. faced a "Munich moment." Otherwise, Bashar al-Assad would "continue to act with impunity." Secretary Kerry also said that Assad now joins Adolf Hitler in using "these weapons in time of war."

However, Assad is no Hitler, who ruled the most industrialized, populous, and militaristic nation at the heart of Europe. Officials should stop attempting to force every modern crisis into the Munich mold.

Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel argued that "the nearly century-old international norm against the use of chemical weapons ... has helped protect the United States homeland and American forces operating across the globe from these terrible weapons." But chemical weapons are not true WMDs, often less lethal than alternatives, like high explosives. This is why North Korea wants to develop nuclear weapons in addition to chemical agents.

Moreover, what protects America is its possession of the world's most powerful military and most destructive nuclear arsenal. Even when the U.S. attacked Hussein's Iraq in 1991 he did not defend himself with chemical weapons because he feared the consequences of doing so.

The secretary also contended that "The word of the United States must mean something. It is vital currency in foreign relations and international and allied commitments."

Yet for two decades successive presidents have insisted that North Korea cannot be allowed to develop nuclear weapons. For two years the Obama administration has declared that Bashar Assad should leave office. The list of demands from U.S. presidents is long and largely unenforced.

President Obama attempted to use Israel to justify attacking Syria. However, a regime beset by a debilitating civil war is not going to start another war. Anyway, noted Israeli ambassador Michael Oren: "Israel can defend itself and will respond forcefully to any aggression by Syria."

Other arguments for intervening also fail. Washington has no prospect of stabilizing, let alone unifying, Syria. Helping oust Assad would aid, not deter, the rise of radical jihadists in Syria.

The fall of Assad would only conclude the first round, leading to a struggle for supremacy among contending groups as well as revenge killing. Washington would acquire new enemies. And even small-scale intervention would further invest the U.S. in the conflict, making it more difficult to avoid deeper involvement.

War is not just another policy option. The American people and their representatives need to insist that Washington's chief responsibility is to defend America. Whatever the state of the Assad regime's chemical weapons, the U.S. should stay out of Syria's tragic civil war.